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THE
FOUNDATION
OF

173. c. 4.
Moral Virtue

CONSIDER'D.

IN A
SERMON
ON

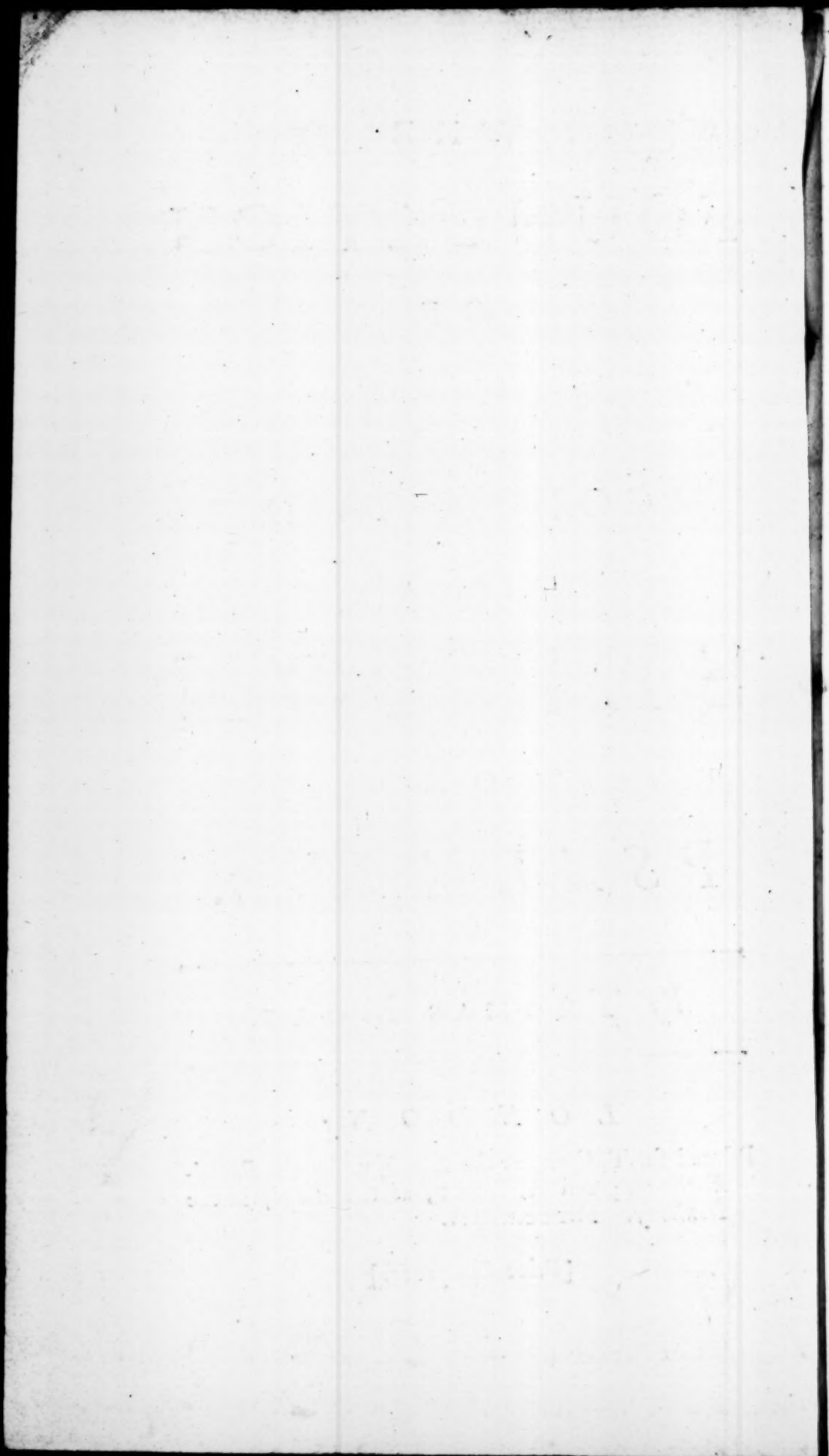
PSALM XL. 7.

By THOMAS MOLE:

L O N D O N :

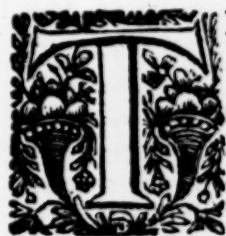
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THE PREFACE.



THE following Sermon was composed and preached some Years ago, to a Congregation in the Country, and without any Thoughts of ever making it publick to the World. The Principle I endeavoured to assert and prove in it, I thought necessary to the very Being and Support of Virtue and Religion ; and though, I own, I may be mistaken herein, yet, I confess, I thought, that whosoever should judge so, could, however, look upon it in no other Light, than as an innocent and harmless Mistake, if possibly it should be found such.

I continued of this Mind till having an Opportunity of preaching it since, in a more publick Place, I found that even sober and judicious Persons not only doubted the Truth of the Doctrine, but expressed their Fears of its evil Tendency ; since which, I

own, I have been inclined, of my self, as well as pressed by my Friends, to offer it to the View and Judgment of the Publick, both from a firm Conviction of the Truth and Importance of the Principle it self, as well as from a Hope that a careful Review of it will remove those Objections, where-ever it may have occasion'd them.

And I have judged a Publication the more proper, on Account of a few Paragraphs which I have observed in a Preface to a Discourse, entitled, *Charity in all its Branches*, lately publish'd by the Reverend and Learned Dr. *Wright*; and which I cannot omit to make some Remarks on, because they relate to the present Argument, and contain some Things, which, in my Apprehension, are highly injurious to it.

There the Reverend Doctor has said, that *Certainty in Matters of Morality, can never be attained but by making the Nature and Will of God the Foundation and Rule of it.* I own, that the Nature and Will of God (if no more was meant by it than this) is certainly a proper Rule for us to measure our moral Practice by, and is one of the Springs from whence our Obligation to Virtue flows: But if it means that Moral Virtue, as it is a Matter of Science, is an Effect produced by the Will of God, I cannot so readily assent to that, because it takes away the whole Foundation upon which we proceed to come at the Knowledge, even of the Nature and Will of God himself; since, if the Ideas of Good and Evil are not previous, but consequent to, and caused by the Will of God, how can we ever know, or how ever attempt to search and discover what the Nature and Will of God is? for this destroys the Foundation upon which our Knowledge of the Nature and Will of God is built.

To say that the Will of God is influenced and govern'd by his own Nature, in fixing the Nature of other Things, is only shifting, but does not clear and get rid of the Difficulty ; for this is said on this Supposition, that his Moral Attributes are necessary, in the same Sense as those which are natural, and his Will excluded from any Influence in both ; whereas there is this material Difference between them, that God is powerful, wise, omnipresent, and eternal ; not because he wills to be so, here his Will has no Influence in quality of Cause ; but he is merciful, just, faithful, and true ; not from a Necessity of Nature, as in the former Case, but because he wills to be so. These flow from the free Choice and Election of his Will, and have relation to it, in the quality of their proper Cause. And it is equally absurd to ascribe the Necessity of his natural Attributes to those which are moral, and the Freedom of his moral Attributes to those which are natural. This Difference alone makes it reasonable to give Thanks and Praises to him for his Goodness, and Justice, and Faithfulness, and Mercy, which hath no Foundation with regard to his Eternity, Power, and Knowledge, which yet, on the other Supposition, would even in this respect stand on the same Footing.

It is further said, that *in his Mind the Model of all Things lay before they were created, and by his unerring Reason, and infinite Wisdom, their different Natures and Relations were ordered, together with the Laws by which every Rank and Species of Beings should be governed.* But this is clearly meant, as, indeed, it only can be meant of those Things which are created, of which there is no Dispute ; the Question is, Whether the moral Difference of Things is to be reckoned by us among those Things, or not ? It is alledged, on the other hand, that it is uncreated and uncaused, eternal and necessary, as the very Existence of God himself, which may be denied,

nied, but will not, I believe, easily be disproved. It is, nevertheless, true, that what Species and Orders of Beings should be created, was purely a Matter of God's Will and Choice; and the particular Laws incumbent upon them, depending chiefly upon the different Powers and Circumstances of those Beings, it so far depended on the Will of God in what particular Instances the Laws of Reason should take Place: But not what should be Reason and Truth, not what should be right and good; which will ever be an invariable Rule in all Cases, to all moral Agents whatever, which is the eternal Rule of God's own Actions, and not one that he hath made for the Actions of his Creatures. The Obligations of Reason and Virtue varying infinitely, according to the Circumstances of moral Agents, and their Actions: It was wholly at the Choice of the great Creator what kind of moral Agents he would create, what Powers and Abilities they should be endued with, and what Circumstances and Relations placed in: But when these are fix'd, it is not then a Matter of Will what Rules it shall be reasonable for such Beings to observe to one another in those Relations.

It is further added, that distinguishing between the Reason of Things and the Will of God, hath rather served the Purposes of Vice, and strengthen'd the Corruptions of many, than produced any real Reformation.

If the Doctor means this as a Matter of Fact, founded upon Observation, it can be no Argument against the Truth and Importance of the Principle it self: It is, indeed, to be lamented, that such innocent and important Truths should be perverted, by weak or by wicked Men, to the Purposes of Vice, in the same manner as we lament, and have, in Truth, great Reason to lament, the very gross Abuses that such kinds of Men make, even of the Doctrines of Christianity it self. But what then, must we re-
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ject Christianity, and forbear to preach it on this Account? Why, yes, we must, with the same Reason as this is insisted on, with Regard to this, or any other Principle. We ought not to make any more Use of this, in the present Case, than we allow Infidels to do, in regard of Christianity. There we all evidently see the Iniquity and Absurdity of it, and cry out against it, as injurious and unjust; and yet the Cases are, in this respect, exactly parallel. The Truth is, this is not a reasonable and justifiable Conduct in this Case, or in that, or in any other, to object this as a Reason against the Truth and Importance of any Principles whatsoever, which are hereby only abused and slandered, whilst they are wholly innocent of the Guilt complain'd of.

But if this is meant not as a Matter of Fact, which has fallen under Observation, but as the supposed Tendency of the Principle it self, I apprehend, it will clearly appear to be a Mistake, altogether groundless, and unjustly charged upon it; and I am greatly surprized, and at a Loss to guess what should have led this Author into it: For in asserting Reason, and the fitness of Things, to be the Foundation of Virtue, we no ways weaken, or intend to weaken, the Obligation arising from the Will of God, but rather strengthen it, and lay the Foundation proper to support it; inasmuch as Obedience to the Will of God is, on this Supposition, it self as essential a Branch of Virtue, as any other, arising from the joint Consideration of our Natures, and the Circumstances and Relations we stand in to one another; and it is as eternally fit that we should always obey the Will of God, as that we should practise Virtue in any other Branch of it. How then can this be said to serve the Purposes of Vice, when that Source of Obligation to the practice of Virtue, the Will of God, which alone he contends for, is left entire, and untouch'd; and another Source of Obligation

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is pointed out to us, which is, indeed, prior in Nature, and in order of our Conceptions, but which no ways subverts this, no ways weakens it, but firmly supports, and ever harmonizes and agrees with it.

The Doctor goes on, and adds; *The Reason and Fitness of Things is the Will of God, so he form'd them, so he placed them in their relation to each other.* That God has so formed all Things as they are, and determined, by his Will, their Relations to each other, is certainly true, and readily owned, there is no Doubt or Controversy about this, with such as differ from him on the present Point: But this is a quite different Thing from saying, that the Will of God is the Cause of that Reason and Fitness that there is in their moral Actions. This no Will of any Being could first make, or can ever change: This is eternal and necessary, uncreated and unchangeable; and this is the single Matter of Controversy on this Head. I allow, with this Author, that Reason, and the Fitness of Things, and the Will of God, are the same; this is that wherein the moral Excellence and Perfection of God evidently consists, that he ever wills that which is agreeable to Reason and Truth; and no Motives of a foreign Nature can ever have Power to influence his Choice, to deviate and swerve from this Rule. He is ever at Liberty to do this, and ever uniformly determines himself to act thus, and nothing can ever shake or weaken this Virtue and Freedom of the divine Nature; whereas I cannot see how, on the other Principles, God can be either virtuous or free. And when, I say, that Reason, and the Fitness of Things, will ever be the same with the Will of God, I imagine, I do it more consistently than the Doctor does; for though, he says, they are the same, he makes one of them the Cause, and the other the Effect.

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The Sentence following is worthy a Remark, as it will lead me to touch on a very material Observation relating to this Argument: *The Will of God*, he says, *is certainly and perpetually the same, according to the continued Truth and Nature of Things.* Those Words, I observe, do equally express our very different Sentiments upon the Subject they relate to: Upon first View, it looks as if the Author was inconsistent with himself, and had contradicted what went before; but, I imagine, that he intends them otherwise, that as the Will of God is the Cause of the Natures and Properties of Things, their continuing the same is a Proof that his Will does so. But this is far from proving or satisfying our Minds, concerning the Immutability of the divine Will. It is, I think, a material Objection against the Principle which this Author advances, that if all Things are to be resolved into the Will of God, as the original Source of their different Natures, they may be changed at Pleasure; and that this will subvert the Certainty of moral Science, and sap the Foundation of all Religion; and, if this Author expects to get rid of this Difficulty in this manner, I imagine, he will be disappointed: For all that this can possibly prove, if allowed to be true, is, that the Will of God has not yet changed, without any Relation to Futurity; that it will not or cannot change is yet left uncertain: And this is far from proving that it most *certainly and perpetually will continue the same.* Does this appear capable of supporting what is contain'd in our Ideas, which we form of the divine Justice, Veracity, and Faithfulness? Is this capable to sustain the firm and unshaken Faith, Hope, Confidence, and Trust, which it is our highest Duty, and greatest Happiness, to repose in him? I must confess, I cannot help looking farther for firmer Ground to build this upon, and fain would hope that I do not flatter my Heart when

I think I have found it in the Principles laid down in the following Discourse.

Our Author proceeds, in the next Paragraph, and further says, that *it will ever be found hurtful to the Cause of Virtue, to teach Men to separate the Reason and Fitness of Things from the Will of God.* I grant it may, indeed, be hurtful to the Cause and Interest of Virtue, to teach Men to *separate* them, so as to pay and confine their Regards to one of them alone, so as to set up one of them in Opposition to the other, and lay either of them entirely aside : But not the least Harm imaginable can follow, from carefully *distinguishing* them in our Thoughts and Theory, which we may justly and safely do, without *separating*, or opposing, or setting either of them aside in our Practice of Virtue. So that to speak of hurting Virtue, by *separating* them, is beside the Purpose, and is not treating the Argument quite unfairly ; for a Man who undertakes to maintain this Principle, is under no Necessity or Temptation to *separate*, but only to *distinguish* them. If any go about to *blaspheme the revealed Will of God, upon Pretence of following the Nature of Things*, I am sure they have no Countenance or Encouragement hence to do so. But Men will be wicked and unwise ; and where is it reasonable to charge the Guilt of this, but upon those Men themselves, and not upon those Principles which they ignorantly mistake, and wickedly pervert, to the serving of such Purposes ? If not, we must charge the very Ignorance and Folly of Antinomians and Enthusiasts upon the Bible it self. If any, on the contrary, attempt to decry and do blaspheme Reason, upon Pretence of following and advancing Revelation, I am equally sure they have no Countenance, not the least Encouragement from Revelation to do so, and am far from laying this Guilt to its Charge : 'Tis either the manifest Ignorance and mistake of weak Persons, or Wicked-

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Wickedness in such as have an End to answer by it ; and I firmly believe, that Reason and Revelation will ever continue in inviolable Friendship, whilst Persons of different Complexions and Characters are doing their Endeavour to set them at Variance.

I thought I ow'd this Duty to Truth, and the Argument I have treated in the following Discourse, to make these Remarks upon the forementioned Paragraphs ; and, I hope, I have done it with Fairness and Candour, and the Decency that was due to the Character of the pious and learned Author. It is well known what great Difficulties such who have endeavoured to fix and settle the Principles of Religion upon a rational Foundation, have laboured under to carry it thus far, and must further encounter, before the glorious Design be accomplished ; whilst the Prejudices of the Populace make vigorous Resistance ; and the Practice of such who ought to encounter them, is meanly employ'd to strengthen and fortify them, and render them invincible. I could not therefore but be sensibly concern'd, when I saw a Man so eminently qualified for publick Service, and who had so much distinguished himself, by a laudable and successful Zeal for Piety, and Liberty, and Charity, stigmatizing and branding with a Mark of Odium, a Principle which lies at the Foundation of Religion and Truth it self, and which, if once destroy'd, will render it impossible for us to know God, or any Thing besides, that is worth knowing. When such Charges come from the Quarters of Ignorance, Enthusiasm or Malice, they are neither to be wonder'd at, fear'd, or regarded : They are harmless in the Effect, whatever they may be in Design ; and whatever they are aim'd at, they will in the End defeat nothing but themselves. But when sensible, sober, and sincere Writers, give themselves a Liberty to represent, in an odious and invidious Light, Principles that support, and alone

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can support, and are advanced singly with a Design to support the whole of Religion ; I conceive of no other Ends it can possibly answer, but to spoil the Fruit of their sincere Labours, who are honestly and heartily engaged in such a Work ; confirm the Ignorant, who are determined to continue such, and stumble those, who, though not yet translated, are in their Passage out of the Kingdom of Darknes, into the Kingdom of Light,



PSALM



PSALM xi. 7.

*For the righteous Lord loveth
Righteousness, his Countenance
doth behold the Upright.*



DAVID, the Penman of this Psalm, though he was of mean Extract, had received an Assurance from God, by the Mouth of his Prophet, that he should obtain the Kingdom, and ascend the Throne, which his Posterity should inherit after him: But he was, in the mean time, to suffer a Variety of Persecutions, and essay the Malice of his most bitter Enemies, who were now in Possession of it, and envied him the Glory of the divine Promise. While *David* struggled with these cruel Persecutors, and strengthen'd his Heart by Hope and Trust in the Providence of God, *Saul*
and

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and his Associates did most bitterly insult him, and, in the midst of their Mockery, mingled such Reflexions, as manifested their Contempt of God and Religion, and how vain they thought it for virtuous and good Men to adhere to, and confide in him; and from the many Difficulties he was forced to encounter, and the various Distresses to which he was reduced, pour'd out the most cutting and severe Invectives against his pious, but, as they thought, idle and vain Trust, which he repos'd in the Promise of Almighty God.

But *David* accustomed himself to serious Reflexion, and mingled devout and holy Meditations with all his Sufferings, and the several Scenes of Sorrow he pass'd through, to assure his Heart against the Assaults of his Enemies, and raise in himself a Hope and Trust in God, while their Reproaches, and his own Afflictions seem'd to drive him into Despair.

It was under such gloomy Circumstances as these that he compos'd this Psalm, wherein he represents the cruel Conduct and Behaviour of his Enemies, and how he comforted and supported himself against them.

Ver. 1. *In the Lord put I my Trust; how say ye to my Soul, Flee as a Bird to the Mountain?* This is an Apostrophe to *Saul*,

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and his Associates, who, on Account of his present Circumstances of Distress, triumphed over him, as in vain, hoping he should ever arrive at the Kingdom, and, with haughty Insult and Contempt, cried; “ See-
“ ing you are pursued by such powerful
“ Enemies, and so hard pressed by them,
“ wherefore flee you not as the timorous
“ Bird, when it perceives the Snare of the
“ Fowler spread, through Fear, flies to
“ the far distant Mountain for Shelter and
“ Safety?” Upon which, he expostulates with them for overlooking, or not regarding, the Ground of his Confidence: “ How
“ can you thus insult and mock me, when
“ it is God I confide in, and the Promise
“ of the Almighty, on which I rely?”

Ver. 2. *For lo the Wicked bend their Bow, they make ready their Arrow upon the String, that they may privily shoot at the upright in Heart.* “ And, indeed, whether should I retire and fly, and where
“ hide my self, from the reach of my Enemies, who are so industrious to work
“ my Overthrow, and not only openly attempt my Ruin, but spread their secret
“ and hidden Snares, and prepare Death
“ for me in every Corner? And how happy is it, that in such Circumstances as
“ these I have the Lord to trust in?”

Ver.

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Ver. 3. *If the Foundations be destroy'd, what can the Righteous do?* “ For when
“ the Distinction between Good and Evil
“ is obliterated and lost, and Piety and
“ Justice is violated and overthrown, what
“ other Treatment can the Righteous and
“ Virtuous expect to receive from the
“ Hands of Men? or what other Course is
“ left for them to take, than to place their
“ Hope and Confidence in God?”

Ver. 4. *The Lord is in his holy Temple, the Lord's Throne is in Heaven; his Eyes behold, his Eye-lids try the Children of Men.*
“ And this is sufficient Ground of Support
“ to them, that though there is none up-
“ on Earth, yet in Heaven there is great
“ and due Regard paid to Righteousness
“ and sincere Virtue; the Lord makes a
“ Difference between what wicked Men
“ confound; he is not ignorant or unob-
“ servant of the Vices of the Wicked, or
“ Afflictions of the Just, but views and
“ takes a becoming Notice of them from
“ his Throne of Government, which is
“ in the highest Heavens.”

Ver. 5. *The Lord trieth the Righteous; but the Wicked, and him that loveth Violence, his Soul abhorreth.* “ Nor is it any Ob-
“ jection against the Providence and Go-
“ vernment of Almighty God, that some-
“ times we see such Sufferings fall to the
“ Lot

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“ Lot of the Righteous, and that wicked
“ Men, who practise and prosper in their
“ Deceit and Violence, are the Instru-
“ ments to inflict them; for the Lord
“ tries the Sincerity of their Virtue, and
“ they give full Proof of it, and become
“ more bright and shining Examples of it,
“ by these Persecutions, as well as other
“ Calamities, which they piously submit
“ to, and patiently endure: And all the
“ Wicked, though at present he restrains
“ the Hand of Punishment, and they, by
“ Appearances, may judge the contrary,
“ he beholds with a just Indignation and
“ Abhorrence.”

Ver. 6. *For upon the Wicked he shall
reign Snares, Fire and Brimstone, and an
horrible Tempest; this shall be the Portion of
their Cup.* “ And he will at length make it
“ evidently appear; for tho’ he leaves them
“ to undisturbed Quiet, and to live unmo-
“ lested in the Practice of Vice, and seems
“ to favour them by the peaceable and
“ prosperous Condition they enjoy; yet
“ first or last; if not now, yet hereafter,
“ when the Time comes for him to sit in
“ Judgment upon the Actions of Men, he
“ will shew them the Displeasure he has
“ conceived against them, and cover them
“ with inevitable and utter Destruction.”

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And

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And this, adds he, I am led to gather, not only from his Promises and Engagements, and from the many fatal Examples which have already happen'd, and from the Nature of his Providence and Government of the World, but from the Nature of God, and from the Nature of Things themselves: *For the righteous Lord loveth Righteousness, his Countenance doth behold the Upright.*

In discoursing on these Words, I shall observe this Method.

I. I shall enquire into the Nature and Foundation of Righteousness, or moral Virtue.

II. I shall explain wherein the Righteousness of God consists.

III. I shall shew that Righteousness or Virtue is, by a necessary Consequence, what *David* makes it, a Ground of good Mens Hope in God, and the Reason of their Acceptance with him.

IV. I shall draw some Inferences from the whole.

I. I shall enquire into the Nature and Foundation of Righteousness, or moral Virtue.

Righte-

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Righteousness here is not to be understood in a particular and limited Sense of Justice, which it sometimes signifies; but it is used here in a more extensive Sense, to signify moral Virtue in general, comprehending in it all that Variety of Obligations, which moral Agents are capable of, and, as such, subject to. And the particular View under which *David* considers it, and in which he would represent it, is as not of an arbitrary and alterable Nature, deriving its Original from the Institution and Appointment, or changeable at the Pleasure of any Being whatsoever, but of a fixed and eternal Nature, immutably obligatory upon moral Agents, and independent even of the Will of God himself.

For thus he brings in the Words of the Text, to close and finish his pious Meditation: “ Since God suffers the Righteous
“ to endure such hard and severe Trials,
“ and permits the Wicked, who persecute
“ and insult them, to enjoy a quiet and
“ undisturbed Prosperity, I make no doubt
“ but that he will fully recompence, and
“ make all Things up to the Virtuous and
“ Upright, and upon the Wicked rain
“ Snares, Fire and Brimstone, and an horrible Tempest; this must be the Portion
“ of their Cup. Since it is naturally fit

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“ that Men of such different Characters
“ should be differently dealt with ; and as
“ it is the Province of God, who is a
“ righteous Being, to separate and sort
“ Men, and allot to every one their respective Portions, it cannot be doubted
“ but that Righteousness and Wickedness
“ will be the sole Rule and Measure of
“ his proceeding, and that he will deal
“ with them as they are found differently
“ to have deserved on this score.”

Some, indeed, think that Righteousness, or moral Virtue, flows originally from the divine Will, and that the Obligation to it is founded in the sole Pleasure and Appointment of God, and make Sin to be nothing but a Transgression of, or Want of Conformity to the divine Command ; that there is no essential Difference in Things antecedent to this, no Distinction between Right and Wrong, Truth and Falshood, but what this makes, and that no Obligation had lain upon us to do Justice, or to love Mercy, if this had not interposed.

But, when we conceive of the several Parts of Righteousness and Virtue, we find, in our Ideas of them, nothing relative to, or dependent on the divine Will at all. Thus *David* here speaks ; and thus we find, upon the least Attention, that these Things are essentially different
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in themselves, have no relation to the Will of any Being whatever, and that they infer an Obligation upon moral Agents, though God should never manifest his Will concerning them at all. This was the Psalmist's Sense: " I confirm my self
" in those Sentiments, says he, from Reason and Nature, and by considering the
" Nature of God also, whose highest Perfection, or rather all whose moral Perfection consists in his steady and unshaken Adherence thereto."

Righteousness, or moral Virtue, is therefore originally to be derived from the Nature of Things, or the natural Relations of Persons and Things one to another, inasmuch as not the Will of any Being makes it to be what it is, or can make it to be any other than it is; but it becomes the Subject of the divine Will and Pleasure, because of that eternal and unalterable Fitness which he perceives in it. Thus, for Example, Truth and Fidelity become reasonable and righteous, from the very Relation those Persons stand to one another in, between whom it is to be practised, inasmuch that, upon a Change of Circumstance, the Obligation ceases; but whilst that Relation remains the same, it is impossible but that Truth and Fidelity must be an amiable Virtue, and the Breach and
Vio-

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Violation of it by Falshood and Treachery, a detestable Crime. It is not the Will of God that makes them so, but they are commanded by him, because they are so in themselves, and because he is a righteous Being, who will never give us such Commands, as clash and interfere with the Nature and Reason of Things.

If Righteousness was not founded in the fix'd and immutable Nature of Things, but in the Will of God, then might the present Nature and Names of Things have been reversed (such had the Will of God been) what is now Righteousness might have been made a Crime, and the highest Virtue, as Things now stand, might have been attended with the highest Guilt; our Consciences might have been so framed, as to have reproached and filled us with the most bitter Remorse, for every generous, glorious, and virtuous Action, and acquitted and applauded us for the vilest Crimes. Hence some have grossly asserted, that God might have commanded Idolatry, Blasphemy, and the Hatred of himself, and such-like Actions, which would thereby have become righteous ones, and matter of Duty to us.

Whereas God himself, by the Mouth of his Prophet, strenuously inveighs against such as subvert these Foundations of Virtue,

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tue, and destroy the natural and necessary Differences between Good and Evil, *Isai.* v. 20. *Wo unto them that call Evil Good, and Good Evil; that put Bitter for Sweet, and Sweet for Bitter, Darknefs for Light, and Light for Darknefs.* Herein he supposes, that the *moral Difference* between Good and Evil, is equally great with the *natural Difference* between Sweet and Bitter, Darknefs and Light, and that it is equally discernable and clear to us; and that there is not in Speculation any Absurdity so great, or in Practice any Crime so aggravated, as to destroy this Difference, or confound Things, so distinct, with one another.

Moreover, if Righteousness, or moral Virtue, was not founded in the fix'd and immutable Nature of Things, and the Relations of Persons and Things one to another, but in the Will of God, then it would be impossible for God to come under any Obligation to his Creatures; nor could there be any Ground or Reason why they should believe, or hope, or confide in him. Because mere Will, if there be no higher Principle of Action, can lay under no Obligation but what mere Will, if it change, can, by that Change, release from; and as nothing is so mutable, arbitrary, and inconstant; his Creatures, to whom
the

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the Declaration of it is made, can have no Foundation from it to build their Confidence on: But if there be, as there most undoubtedly is, such an eternal and unalterable Difference in Things, as that it is morally good to keep Promise, and morally evil to violate and break it, then have we the highest Certainty and Assurance, with the Promise of God, that the righteous Lord, who loveth Righteousness, will adhere to and observe it.

Some, indeed, conceive of the divine Nature as prior to the divine Will, and speak of that as a Rule for the divine Being to go by, in issuing forth his Precepts and Laws: But this is to make God, if I may so speak, a *necessary Agent*, even in his *moral Character*, and destroys that Freedom which is necessary to the Notion of a moral Agent. Since his Nature, as a moral or virtuous Being, is, in the Order or our Conceptions, subsequent to, and in Consequence of his Will; for however necessary be his Attributes of Power, Wisdom, and Eternity, he is good, and true, and just, not *necessarily*, but because he *freely chooses and wills* to be so, otherwise we must make his Will necessary, and so shall introduce the Doctrine of Fate.

Agreeably hereunto were the Sentiments and Reasoning of the Patriarch *Abraham*,
Gen.

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Gen. xviii. 25. That be far from thee to slay the Righteous with the Wicked, and that the Righteous should be as the Wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do right? which plainly supposes that there is a right and wrong, a good and evil in Actions independent of the Will, even of God himself; otherwise this would carry in it no more than this: *Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do what he will?* which is plainly making it an Appeal to Sovereignty and arbitrary Power; whereas it is meant as an Appeal to common Equity and Justice, of which God has made us capable of forming clear Ideas. This may be illustrated from the Case of *Abraham*. God promised him, that if he would leave his Country, he would make with him a Covenant, and insure him a numerous and large Posterity, and them the Possession of the Land of *Canaan*. *Abraham's* Security arises not from the Will of God alone, but inasmuch as he knew it was in it self a reasonable and righteous Action to keep Promise, and naturally wicked, for no Cause, to break it; and that such was the Rectitude of the divine Will, as preserves him from acting inconsistent with the Nature and Reason of Things, therefore he might safely and certainly rely on it. Before

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this

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this Promise, God was at entire Liberty, but afterwards he was bound to adhere to and observe it; nor could his *Promise* be safely relied on, if it was possible for him to break it.

Such is the reasoning of the Author to the *Hebrews*, as evidently confirms this, speaking of the Assurance God had given Christians, of his stedfastly adhering to the gospel covenant, *Heb. vi. 17, 18. God willing more abundantly to confirm the Heirs of the Promise, confirmed it by an Oath, that by two immutable Things, in which it is impossible for God to lye, they might have strong Consolation.* Did a *Promise* and *Oath* receive their binding Virtue and Power from the divine Will, they could add no Force to a simple *Manifestation of his Will*, could not be called immutable, since they were changeable at Pleasure; nor could make it impossible for God to lye, since he might, upon that Supposition, break through all Promises and Oaths without any Guilt; and his Creatures could have no possible Assurance that he would not.

God is at perfect Liberty whether he will produce such Creatures as we are, and whether he will make us any Promises, or bind himself by any Oaths, but no one sure will say, that when he has voluntarily

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rily given us the most *solemn Promises*, and given them the Sanction of his *sacred Oath*, that he is not bound by such kind of Engagements; which yet, if they derive their Obligation from his Will, he certainly is not.

It would also follow from supposing Righteousness and moral Virtue to flow from the Will of God alone, that there were no different Degrees in the Guilt of the wicked, or of Merit in the virtuous Actions of Men, but what the Will of God made, and that there would be no Difference between taking away a Man's Life, and robbing him of the least Portion of his Property; no Difference between what we call the lowest and the highest, and most heroic Act of Virtue, which is, indeed, a great and palpable Absurdity.

It seems therefore evident and plain, that our Obligation to Righteousness, or moral Virtue, is not originally to be resolved into the Will of God, but into the Nature of those Actions themselves, compared with the Nature, Circumstances, and Relations of those Beings, by whom they are performed.

Not but that the Will of God constitutes an Obligation to the practise of Virtue, upon all such Persons to whom a sufficient Discovery of it is made; insomuch as God's

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commanding those Actions, which were before obligatory on us from Reason and Nature, strengthens our Obligation to observe them for the future, or rather we come under a new Obligation, and our Crime in transgression will be more aggravated. Such is the Case of all Christians, whose Obligation to moral Virtue is two-fold; the one arising from the Reasonableness and Fitness of it, and the other from the Authority and Command of God: So also does the Command of God carry a sufficient Obligation with it self, where there was none arising from Nature before. Such was the Case of *Adam*, whose only Obligation to forbear eating the Fruit that grew upon the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, was founded in the Will of God forbidding it. But there is, notwithstanding, an eternal Difference between Good and Evil, which is the primary Obligation; and is so far from resulting from the Will of God, that it is this by which his Will always determines and directs it self, and by which, in a *moral Sense*, it is *impossible* but it should, as the Author to the *Hebrews* asserts, *It is impossible for God to lye.*

II. I proceed to explain wherein the Righteousness of God consists, and that is in these two Things.

I. In

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I. In an infinite and all-perfect Comprehension of the several different Relations he stands in to his Creatures, and they to him, and the consequent Obligations which arise from them ; so that he is not ignorant of the Circumstances of any of his Creatures, or of the different Degrees of Virtue or Vice belonging to their Characters. These various Objects, though infinite in Number, he as easily attends to, and as fully comprehends, as we can the single Object of our most attentive Thought. Nothing is, indeed, so perplex'd and intricate, and so hard to be pronounced on, as the Circumstances of Actions, and the mingled Characters of Men and Things : But all this Difficulty is comparative and relative to our confined Faculties, and finite *Minds* ; at the Thought of an infinite and unbounded *Mind* it all vanishes and disappears ; *With Men this is impossible, but with God all Things are possible.* This is what the Psalmist had in his Thoughts, and expresses in the Context, in most emphatical Terms ; *His Eyes behold, his Eyelids try the Children of Men.* With us it is far otherwise, the Appearances of Things often deceiving us, and being taken by us for the Truth ; but to him *all Things are naked and open.*

And

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And as he knows the various Circumstances of all his Creatures, and the several Relations wherein they stand to him; so he cannot be at a Loss about what Measures it is *becoming* him to take: He is not laboriously to search and deduce this, but his infinite Capacity faithfully administers to him the Knowledge of all Things, which it becomes a God of Righteousness to do, with infinite Justice and Mercy to his Creatures, and equal Honour to his own Character. And in this is God infinitely above us; for when the Characters of Persons, and Circumstances of Things, are fairly and fully exposed to our View, we are frequently unable to form such a Judgment, as is sufficient Ground for us to proceed to Action.

Neither can God ever err, or mistake in the Judgment that he forms about his own Actions; he cannot mistake or misapply them, or judge amiss about the fitness and suitableness of them to the Circumstances of his Creatures, or the Ends and Purposes he intends to answer by them. This is often the Effect of our most diligent Enquiries; we are not only ignorant of many Circumstances, both of Persons and Actions, and labour under Uncertainty, unable to determine our selves, but we also mistake and misapply our Actions, and, how well
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soever we consider, yet fail in the Application of our Conduct and Behaviour: But God has such a comprehensive and exact Knowledge of all Things, as is necessary to a perfect and unerring Conduct, and leaves no room or possibility of any *Ignorance, Hesitation, or Mistake.*

2. The Righteousness of God consists in the constant and uniform Determination of his Will, to act agreeably to Reason and Truth; so that there is not only a perfect Harmony between the Nature of Things, and his Perceptions of them, but a never-failing Agreement also between his Understanding and his Will: And this, indeed, strictly and properly speaking, is that wherein alone the Righteousness or Virtue of God consists. Let us have ever so perfect an Understanding, and form ever so exact a Judgment of the fitness of Action, we are frequently bribed by our Passions, bias'd by sinister Views and Intentions, and turn'd from pursuing it. Interests, foreign to the Nature of Truth and Virtue, and founded in the Circumstances of our present Life, influence our Wills, and captivate our Choice: But God, as he perfectly knows what is right, steadily adheres to, and invariably pursues it; for he is subject to the Power and perverse Bias of no irregular and unreasonable Passions;

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sions; nor has he any Interest or Views to be concerned for, but the *Cause of Virtue and the universal Good*. And this is what the Psalmist here observes; not only is there an unalterable Rectitude in the Nature of Things, but there is an inflexible Rectitude of Judgment and Will in the divine Nature: *The righteous Lord loveth Righteousness.*

III. I proceed to show, that Righteousness and Virtue is, by a necessary Consequence, what the Psalmist makes it, a Ground of good Mens Hope in God, and the Reason of their Acceptance with him.

From what has been said, it is obvious to observe, that the Righteousness of Men is, as to Nature and Kind, the same, and no other, than the Righteousness of God; for the Idea of Righteousness is uniformly the same, when applied to one or the other of them; Man's Righteousness differing from God's only, as to the Degree of it, as he is perfectly and infinitely so, and they imperfectly, and theirs differing from one anothers only as to the different Degrees of Perfection or Imperfection, in which they practise it. And nothing tends more to confound the Nature of our Ideas, and subvert the Foundations of Truth and

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Virtue, than to suppose the Righteousness of God and of Men different in kind ; nor can any Thing be more opposite to the Declarations of the Scriptures, which I doubt not, with this View, frequently command us to *be holy, as God is holy* ; and *pure, as he is pure* ; that is, that tho' in Degree it is impossible we should attain to an Equality with God, yet, as to Nature and Kind, our Righteousness and Virtue must be the same with his, and which, in the Proportion wherein we practise it, will be a Ground of our Hope in him.

Thus therefore the Psalmist comforts himself in his Uprightness and Virtue, and the Hope in God, which that inspired him with. “ I am here, says he, surrounded
“ with wicked Men, with whom Truth
“ and Virtue are of no Value, and these
“ prosper and are in great Power, whilst
“ I, though upright, am ready to perish
“ by the Violence and Cruelty of their
“ Persecution and Oppression. But as
“ there is such an internal Difference of
“ Good and Evil, as makes us deserving
“ of a quite different Fate ; and as God,
“ the Governor and Judge of the World,
“ invariably guides himself by this immu-
“ table Rule, I please my self that this is

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“ the

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“ the Measure, Standard, and Rule, by
“ which he will judge of the Actions of
“ Men; that this is what he will love and ap-
“ prove, and reward in us in our different
“ Proportions.” And, indeed, there is a
necessary Consequence from Man’s doing
a righteous Action to God’s approving it;
and we may be as sure God is pleased with
our Virtue, as that we perform it, because
the Nature of Actions and Things are not
arbitrary and unsettled, but invariably and
necessarily what they are; nor is God a
Being, who acts by Will and Pleasure on-
ly, and without Regard to Reason and
Truth: But he is *the righteous Lord, who
loveth Righteousness*; and therefore virtu-
ous and good Men may assure themselves,
as *David* does here, that *his Countenance*
is pleased in *beholding the Upright*.

IV. I proceed to draw some Inferences
from the whole.

1. We may hence infer, that the Ap-
probation of the divine Being is not, can-
not be personal, but founded on the Cha-
racters and Actions of Men; we see here
what is the Ground of his Approbation, it
is *Righteousness*, or moral Virtue. God is
not a Being who can have any fondness or
liking for the Persons of Men, irrespectively
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ly to their Characters: There is no room to hope for this in God, because there is no Reason in it. He is *the righteous Lord*, who *loveth Righteousness*, approves and accepts no Man, but under such a Character and such a Consideration; he loveth and approveth not Men barely and simply consider'd, but such as their Virtue and Righteousness recommend to his Love: His Countenance beholdeth not this or that Man, but it *beholdeth the Upright*, who, or where, or whatsoever he be. This is agreeable to the amiable and worthy Views in which Jesus Christ, his own Son, has represented him to us; with him *neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, availeth any Thing, but a new Creature*; Righteousness and true Virtue, which is in it self essentially good, and is invariably the Rule of his own Actions, he approves in Men, where-soever he beholds it; no Character, no Circumstance of Men, can make him overlook this, or prevent his applauding it, or procure his Acceptance without it, for with him there is *no respect of Persons*; and there is hardly a Notion or Conception of God, that has been drawn from the Doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, that is more contrary to Reason, or injurious to God,

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than that of his *personal Fondness*, and *arbitrary Choice*.

2. We may hence infer, that God has not, as some impiously and profanely suggest, dissolved our Obligations to Righteousness and Virtue, by the Christian Dispensation. It hence appears to be impossible. It is, indeed, suitable to the Opinion of those who place the Foundation of moral Virtue in the Will of God, to suppose that he may alter it if he pleases, and no one can be ever sure upon that Supposition, but that he may alter it; for it is but altering his Will, which can have no invariable Guide but *Fate* or *Reason*, and then it is done. But how such a Being can ever be the Object of his Creatures Trust, it will be hard to imagine.

3. This may serve to vindicate the Practice of Religion and Virtue from the Cavils and Objections of atheistical Men, who resolve it all into the political Invention of designing Men, and assign no higher or other Original to moral Goodness, than the bare Authority of human Laws and civil Government; and profess to believe that it is nothing else has given Rise to the Difference Men make between *Good* and *Evil*, than the Contrivance of Men, who have cunningly devised such
Rules

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Rules of Action, as make for the Peace and Good of Society, and quiet Administration of human Government.

4. This shows us how vain are their Hopes in the favour of God, which are placed on any Thing but Righteousness and Virtue, and who substitute other Expedients in its stead. Nothing that we put into the Place of this can atone for, or supply the Want of it; nor can any counterfeit and hypocritical shew of it pass with God, who sees through every Appearance and Disguise, and whose Countenance beholdeth only the sincere and upright. Whatever Sinners and self-deluded Persons may now make the Ground of their Confidence, or hereafter make the Ground of their Plea, the Lord will shew not only an inflexible Regard to Virtue, but a Disregard to every Thing else, that *he loveth Righteousness, but hateth all the Workers of Iniquity.*

It also evidently hence appears how absurd it is to make a Comparison between the Excellence of positive Duties, and those of a moral Obligation; and to do this from this Pretence, that because it is a moral Duty to obey God, therefore to observe positive Institutions is moral Virtue, is one of the greatest Sophisms in the World.

Because

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Because all the Excellence that there is in observing positive Institutions, is in the obeying God in them, which is of a moral Nature, and so out of the Comparison, and what remains being only the outward Action it self, cannot possibly have any Excellency in it at all, which yet is all that is positive in the Matter. For to obey God, is a moral Duty in all Cases, consequently as well in such, where the Action is of an indifferent, as where it is of a moral Nature; and not that any Thing becomes moral by God's selecting an arbitrary Instance of expressing this our Obedience to him in, which was not so before; for if so, we may as well suppose his Will to have constituted the moral Nature of all Things at first, as that he can ever do it in any one Instance, at any Time whatsoever; it would be as reasonable to make the Will of God the Original and Foundation of moral Virtue, and the sole Cause of moral Obligation, as that he can make any Thing a moral Virtue, which was not so before he made it so. But moral Virtue is plainly of such a settled and immutable Nature, that neither the Will of God, nor any Thing else, can either make or unmake, or any way alter it. And it is no more to derogate

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gate from the Power, or limit the Perfection of God, to assert this, with respect to *moral* than to *natural* Truth; and to say that his Will is not the Cause why the whole of any Thing is equal to its Parts, or that it is impossible to exist and not exist at the same Time, which yet surely the Will of God neither made to be so, nor can make to be otherwise.

6. Let us all be exhorted to the sincere Practice of that Righteousness and Virtue, which alone renders Men acceptable to God, and will be regarded in their Characters at the great Day. And let us learn to comfort our selves, and confide in God, in the Practice of Virtue, and especially when reduced to suffer for the sake of it, by considering that we are acting as it is eternally reasonable and fit we should act, and as God invariably determines himself to act, and, by necessary Consequence, we may be assured will be highly pleased in seeing us do so. *The Lord loveth Righteousness*, though wicked Men hate it; *his Countenance* honoureth and respecteth *the Upright*, though the Wicked make a Derision and a Scorn at them. Let us therefore stedfastly persist and persevere
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in it, not only because of the natural Excellence that there is in it, and the moral Obligation that this brings upon us, but also from this further encouraging Consideration, that *the Lord is righteous, and loveth Righteousness, and that his Countenance doth behold the Upright.*

F I N I S.



